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# How networks work

Learning networks that make a difference for pupils

‘...it’s important to understand that nothing really changes for pupils unless there are changes in the beliefs and practices of the adults in schools who work with them... Networks have the potential to create the conditions for these changes to occur.’

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For a full account of the external evaluation of the Networked Learning Communities (NLC) programme download Earl, L et al (Aporia Consulting Ltd. with University of Nottingham), 2006, How Networked Learning Communities Work, Nottingham, NCSL. Go to [www.ncsl.org.uk/nlg](http://www.ncsl.org.uk/nlg) and access the A–Z list of publications.

This summary, written specifically for practitioners, reproduces key findings and implications from that report with kind permission of the authors.

Editors Julie Temperley & Caireen Goddard

## Introduction: If the future is networked...

It is increasingly the case that if you are in a school, you are in a network. You have probably already been offered at least one opportunity to lead or to participate in development work that involves collaboration with practitioners from other schools.

If you are a headteacher, you may well be dealing with requests to contribute your leadership time, or to release staff to participate in network activities that have been chosen or designed by people outside your school and that have major implications for resources and practice inside your school. How do you decide whether and how to take part and what

will add value? How do you know if you are the right person to be involved, who else could be involved and what you should all be doing? How do you know if the 'cost' – time especially – will be well-spent to make a difference for pupils?

And if you are an old hand at this, and have been leading and learning and working in networks for some time, how do you distinguish, amongst the complex range of opportunities and challenges, those that have real benefit? How do you know what to do again next year, what to change and what to stop?

## ...then you need to know how networks work

This summary sets out to help you to answer some of these complex and difficult questions. It has been written as an accessible way of looking at the evidence from a three-year evaluation of Networked Learning Communities, the largest sustained network-based school reform initiative in the world. Over 1500 schools in England worked in Networked Learning Communities from 2002–06, and around half of those were involved in the

evaluation. So the chances are that quite a few of them will be schools like yours and the findings and implications explored in this summary will be relevant and helpful to you.

At the end of this publication you will find a table showing a series of 'dos' and 'don'ts' for network leaders. You might find it useful to use this as a tool for reflection and discussion, perhaps amongst your network's leadership team.

## Further resources and information [www.ncsl.org.uk/nlc](http://www.ncsl.org.uk/nlc)

Resources are now available through a redesigned website which gives easy access to thousands of useful documents, including research, case studies, practical resources and other publications, both from the Networked Learning Communities programme and beyond.

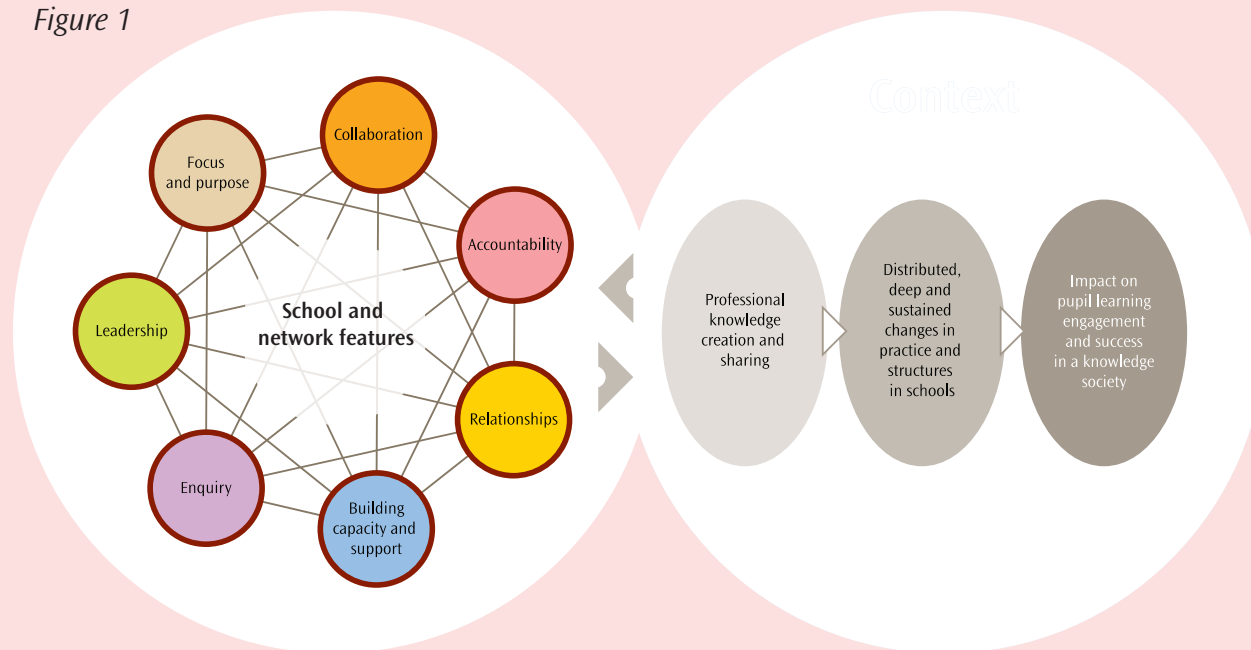
If you want to find out more about any of the topics mentioned in this summary, you can also access the '20 questions' online tool, which provides answers to 20 commonly asked questions about networks and gives links to specially selected resources.

## It can be hard to see the influence of networks...

Networks of schools are amorphous; they have many different forms and structures; they engage different people in different ways at different times; and they do not directly result in many products that can be attributed to their work. This means

that the benefits of school networks are almost always indirect, evidenced in changes that occur in schools and classrooms that are removed from the network by time and space, making it very hard to prove direct links.

Figure 1



The diagram in Figure 1 helps us to think through the dynamic relationships between the different features of networks and, in particular, how they combine to influence structures and processes in schools that are part of the network.

Why is this important? There are two specific reasons. First, it is important to recognise that the purpose of having a network of schools, its *raison d'être*, is to improve pupil learning. That is what schools are for so it is also what networks are for. When practitioners who are working together jointly and publicly declare that improving pupil learning is their intended outcome, it gives their planning and their activities a focus and a set of principles.

It gives them what is sometimes called a shared 'moral purpose', which is motivating, rewarding and sustaining. Many practitioners who work in effective networks (and it is effectiveness that we are talking about here) speak about the new purpose and motivation that it brings to their work.

Secondly, it is important to understand that nothing really changes for pupils unless there are changes in the beliefs and practices of the adults in schools who work with them. Changing thinking and practice is the key to securing impact for pupils. Networks have the potential to create the conditions for these changes to occur. But school and network leaders need to encourage practitioners to

embrace new ideas, to reflect on and challenge their own and colleagues' beliefs and to recognise and capitalise upon tacit knowledge – their own and other people's – in order for that to happen.

So that is the bad news. Networks are complex to inhabit, to lead and to

understand. It is not always easy to capture the ways in which being in a network is having an effect and in order to secure any of the benefits you need both to win the hearts and minds and to change the established thinking and practice of hard-pressed practitioners.

## ...but we know that networks can and do influence pupil learning

Here is the good news. Fact – networks can and do influence pupil learning. When schools work together in networks, there is a positive impact on pupil attainment. There was significantly more improvement in average attainment levels of schools in Networked Learning Communities during the period of the programme (2002–06) than in those not in NLCs.

This was at all Key Stages, and for both raw and value-added outcomes. And it is not only attainment that is affected. A 2005 systematic review of network evaluations from around the world also found evidence of the impact of school networks for pupils' attainment, engagement, motivation, social skills and attendance.<sup>1</sup>

## There is more you need to know...

Of course, simply being part of a network does not automatically secure significant changes in school and improved learning outcomes for pupils. It is good network practice that makes the difference, and the NLC evaluation sets out to tell us what that looks like.

There are seven key issues to which you should pay serious attention to make sure you get the most benefit for your school. They are (in no particular order):

1. **relationships and collaboration are beginnings ... not ends in themselves**
2. **joint work that challenges thinking and practices is the critical core of collaboration**
3. **school and network foci need to be right, shared and understood**
4. **schools' strength of engagement in the network is important**
5. **collaborative enquiry is an important new skill**
6. **distributed leadership is important in schools and networks**
7. **formal leadership matters**

<sup>1</sup> Bell, M, Cordingley, P & Mitchell, H, 2005, *The impact of networks on pupils, practitioners, organisations and the communities they serve A summary of the systematic review of literature*, Nottingham, NCSL

## 1. Relationships and collaboration are beginnings... not ends in themselves and 2. Joint work that challenges thinking and practices is the critical core of collaboration

Collaboration is essential but it is not the only requirement if networks are to make a difference for pupils. What have been referred to as 'soft' or 'loose' collaborative arrangements between schools are unlikely to have any impact on pupils. However, effective networks are not about 'hard' or 'tight' structures (such as hard, federated arrangements). It is about the rigour and challenge of the collaborative work. It matters what people do when they come together and we believe that joint work that challenges thinking and practice is central to the power of networks.

This kind of joint work is a qualitatively different type of collaboration that requires participants to suspend judgement, challenge their assumptions and intentionally seek out new information in the quest for understanding. It involves working together to create new professional knowledge, being receptive to feedback from others, talking freely with colleagues about differing views, opinions and values, and dealing openly with conflicts. It is the kind of interaction that is a necessary part of deep changes to thinking and practice.

Joint work that challenges thinking and practice is not easy. It requires people to be honest, transparent and willing to examine their own beliefs and current ways of doing. It also suggests being able to live with

ambiguity and to challenge one another in productive ways. This kind of interaction presumes a high level of personal confidence and trust.

And trust is a big issue in networks. Trusting relationships, where individuals have shared understandings, are a necessary condition for working and reflecting together. It certainly seems clear that relationships that embody trust, shared understanding and collective responsibility are more important when practitioners are working with colleagues in other schools in a network than when they are working with colleagues in their own school. Practitioners are more likely to take for granted that they can trust and rely on people whom they know well and who share the same history and context.

Although it is helpful when staff like and trust colleagues in their own school, interaction among colleagues who get along and support one another as a routine part of their work does not test the status quo. Bringing people together from different schools raises the level of challenge and so is more likely to have an impact on practice.

Finding ways to help practitioners in different schools build trusting relationships feels like a serious challenge for network leaders. But the solution might be as simple as getting people together earlier and more often. Joint work for high order purposes builds trust.

### Key messages:

It matters what people do when they come together in a network. Networks impact on pupils when there is rigour and challenge to the collaborative work. This kind of joint work, that which challenges thinking and practice, is not easy. It requires people to be honest, transparent and willing to examine their own beliefs and current ways of doing.

## 3. The school and network foci need to be right, shared and understood

Educational reform is a major focus for nations around the world. This means that schools are inundated with ideas and mandates all purporting to offer more integrated and differentiated ways to serve pupils. Although many of these innovations have merit and they are often inextricably connected, schools and networks have the task of deploying them in a way that uses their time and energy to best advantage.

A clear, high-leverage and challenging focus is an important feature of successful

learning networks. Having such a focus enables people to come together to reflect on and rethink their beliefs and their practices and to minimise the clutter of activity in the school or network.

Having a clear and agreed focus also provides the core of the vision and direction that allows networks to go deeper, create alignment, build capacity and share what is being learnt. Without a defined focus there is always the risk of creating many different initiatives but no core compelling ideas to focus the agenda.

### Key message:

A clear, high-leverage, challenging and widely understood focus is an important feature of successful learning networks.

## 4. Schools' strength of engagement in the network is important

Schools' connections to the network need to be strong and pervasive. Participants in network activities form the links between schools and it is important to engage as many as possible if the network is to influence pupil learning.

The number of staff involved in network activities turns out to be significantly related to improvements in pupil outcomes and to changes in practitioners' thinking and practice. Put simply, the evidence shows that there is a positive correlation between the number of people involved in

network activities and impact on pupils. We know that it is when practitioners change their beliefs and practices that networks make a difference for pupils but it can be hard for school leaders to agree to release more than a handful of staff to the network, especially if their school is under pressure. What this finding suggests is that it is worth spending time thinking creatively about how to involve as many people as possible from every school in the network. The gains justify the investment.

### Key message:

The evidence shows that there is a positive correlation between the number of people involved in network activities and impact on pupils.

<sup>2</sup> Hargreaves, D, 2003, *Education Epidemic: Transforming secondary schools through innovation networks*, London, Demos.



## 5. Collaborative enquiry is an important new skill

Collaborative enquiry is a form of joint work that is widely acknowledged to be central to learning networks. It is a mechanism that has the potential to create deep changes in thinking and dramatic changes in practice. It includes, by definition, ongoing and challenging engagement with new ideas, rethinking existing beliefs, unlearning past habits and practices, and going through the process of learning how to do things in (sometimes dramatic) new ways. It should be characteristic of the way that networks operate.

But it is difficult to develop and sustain collaborative enquiry. Why is it so hard, even though we understand how important it is?

In the first place, for many practitioners and school leaders, collaborative enquiry requires the development of new ways of thinking and the acquisition of new knowledge and skills. It is a mistake to assume that practitioners automatically

know how to engage in collaborative enquiry. It can be challenging and it requires participants to work together on serious issues – issues arising from their local context and professional practice – that need investigation, reflection the challenging of existing ideas.

Secondly, school and network leaders need to create the context where enquiry can flourish. Practitioners need time and space to enquire together and the allocation of resource assigns priority to enquiry and can raise its status in school. Other resources are required too. Access to information from beyond the school or the network through research evidence, consultants or critical friends is important. And this is an investment worth making. Collaborative enquiry secures the greatest change in practitioners' thinking and practice – the key to improving pupil learning outcomes – of any of the collaborative practices found in networks.

### Key message:

Collaborative enquiry secures the greatest change in practitioners' thinking and practice – the key to improving pupil learning outcomes – of any of the collaborative practices found in networks.

## 6. Distributed leadership is important in schools and networks

Leadership in networks is not connected to role or position but to activities and practices that many individuals undertake within a complex system of interactions. This is a really important finding about networks, because it multiplies the opportunities for influential leadership.

Distributed leadership allows many people to perform leadership work in order to influence teaching and learning.

Networks are generating many new and different leadership opportunities and distributed leadership has the potential to change thinking and practice and pupil

learning in schools. In networks, leadership, learning and changes to practice are all bound up in joint work and enquiry activities. But are the right people doing and learning the right things in those roles?

In many schools, practitioners are involved in co-ordinating in-school activities, establishing school action plans, providing support, resources and information to colleagues, evaluating school progress and encouraging others to seek advice. Within networks, colleagues are doing some of the same things, but activities in networks tend to emphasise leadership of a work or enquiry group, or co-ordination of activities between groups, rather than engaging with organisational procedures or role expectations.

To be effective, distributed leadership needs to stay connected to a model of joint work that challenges thinking and practice – such as collaborative enquiry – so that it can focus and deepen how practitioners think about and engage in their daily work.

So it is important not to confuse delegation with distributed leadership. Simply assigning tasks, however substantial, to practitioners and then calling them leaders does not make them so. Distributed leadership involves practitioners enacting leadership tasks within their own roles. Teachers display leadership by influencing their colleagues towards improved classroom practice and not by just taking on extra administrative or managerial tasks.

### Key messages:

Leadership in networks is not connected to role or position but to activities and practices that many individuals undertake within a complex system of interactions.

Teachers display leadership by influencing their colleagues towards improved classroom practice and not by just taking on extra administrative or managerial tasks.

## 7. Formal leadership matters

We know the culture that formal leaders foster in school contributes to the way colleagues relate to one another professionally and influences changes in thinking and practice. But how important is it that the formal leaders in school (ie headteachers, their deputies and assistant headteachers) are actively involved in the network? In larger schools, especially secondaries, it can seem like a good idea to use the network to foster leadership skills in middle leaders by delegating power and authority, or to other staff by empowering

them to participate. Headteachers in particular can sometimes feel it unnecessary to be deeply and actively involved themselves.

But we now know from the evidence of the NLC evaluation that there is a positive correlation between the involvement of formal leaders, especially headteachers and the impact of the network on pupil learning and attainment. The role of headteachers in networks is to encourage and motivate others to participate in the

network, set and monitor the network agenda, make the connection between the network and the school, and provide support that allows staff members to participate in network activities. Where formal leaders model networked learning and fulfil these important and strategic responsibilities for others in the network their commitment becomes visible. It also helps to forge a direct relationship between formal school leadership and informal network leadership, because they are different.

It would be easy to assume that headteachers, deputies and others with formal leadership roles in school automatically have the skills necessary to occupy leadership roles effectively in the network without additional development. But this is certainly not always the case and, given how important these leaders are to the success of the network, it is essential to ensure that there are collaborative learning opportunities such as mentoring, coaching and enquiry for them as well as for teachers and other practitioners.

Key message:

There is a positive correlation between the involvement of formal leaders, especially headteachers and the impact of the network on pupil learning and attainment.

So what does all this mean for my network?

Dos	Don'ts
Do analyse the context and needs of the network carefully and then identify a network learning focus that you know has worked effectively in a similar context elsewhere.	Don't use the network to deliver something that only a small group believes in. Networks need active participants, not passive recipients of others' ideas.
Do choose a network learning focus that stretches participants, one that means they have to unlearn old beliefs and expectations and challenge themselves and each other with new ones.	Don't clutter network schools with new initiatives or projects. The focus should fit as closely as possible with existing staff and school development needs; the network can offer a fresh approach.
Do ensure that the network offers collaborative learning opportunities such as mentoring, coaching and enquiry for school leaders as well as for teachers and other adults.	Don't invest all your energy in designing and setting up the network and its activities and then leave them to run themselves. Monitor progress regularly to check whether anything needs attention.
Do make explicit to participants that, although improving pupil learning is the network's ultimate aim, this can only be achieved by improving practitioner and leader learning.	Don't assume that heads and deputies and others with formal leadership roles in school automatically have the skills necessary to undertake network leadership roles effectively without additional development.
Do encourage teachers and other adults to display leadership by influencing their colleagues towards improved classroom practice. This means leading by example, not just taking on extra administrative or managerial tasks.	Don't distribute all the responsibility for leading the network away from the formal leaders in schools and don't confuse delegation with distributed leadership. Simply assigning tasks, however substantial, to practitioners and then calling them leaders does not make them so.
Do create the context (time, space, assigned priority) for as many as possible to engage in collaborative enquiry. It should become typical of the way that the network operates. Do also provide the resources participants need to challenge their existing beliefs and practices by making information from beyond the network readily available and accessible eg through use of research evidence, consultants or critical friends and study visits.	Don't assume that people know how to engage in collaborative enquiry. It involves a set of skills and dispositions that are new to many schools. Participants may need support to work together on serious issues that require investigation, reflection and challenging of established ideas.
Do extend the network's influence by finding ways to involve parents and governors in network activities and decision-making.	Don't avoid or ignore people who disagree with you. Networks thrive on diversity of opinion, new ideas, ambiguity, challenge and a range of alternative approaches.
Do keep trying to find ways to involve schools more deeply in network activity. There is a relationship between schools' strength of connection to their network and improvement in their pupil learning outcomes. The greater a school's participation and contribution, the more its staff and pupils will benefit.	Don't just rely on existing patterns of engagement (eg school councils) for involving pupils in the network. Pupils need discrete roles and resources and skills development opportunities in order to engage seriously with adults and be truly equal participants in the network.